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ABSTRACT

This study examined two competing hypotheses regarding the competence of single custodial fathers which have implications for considering parents' gender in awarding child custody: (1) parenting differences are based on gender, and single mothers will have higher parenting scores than single fathers; and (2) changes in role responsibilities following divorce outweigh gender effects, and parenting differences will be between married and single mothers and married and single fathers. Data were collected from parents and a 6- to 10-year-old focal child in 30 single-father, 30 single-mother, and 30 two-parent families. Parent and child versions of a parenting perception inventory were used to evaluate the parent-child relationship for each parent living in the household, with parent(s) and child rating how often the parent engaged in nine positive and nine negative behaviors. Three scores were obtained: positive and negative subscale scores and total score. Results supported the second hypothesis. Findings indicated that single fathers' positive scores were higher than married fathers', but no different from mothers'. Single mothers had lower positive scores than married mothers, but no different from fathers. Married fathers had lower positive scores than married mothers. Single fathers' total scores were no different from any other parents'. Single mothers' total scores were lower than married mothers', and married fathers' total scores were also lower than married mothers'. Single fathers proved to be competent parents with more positive behaviors than married fathers, with an overall parent-child relationship no different from other parents. There were no group differences in the children's parenting perception inventory scores. (Contains 13 references.) (KDFB)

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RETHINKING CUSTODY: THE CASE FOR SINGLE CUSTODIAL FATHERS

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RETHINKING CUSTODY: THE CASE FOR SINGLE CUSTODIAL FATHERS

When parents divorce, custody of the children becomes a legal issue. Although fathers are more likely to be awarded custody now than in the past, physical custody is still awarded to the mother in the vast majority of cases. These custody decisions have been influenced by the tender years doctrine which presumes that mothers provide the majority of child care during marriage therefore they are better prepared to parent after divorce, especially when children are young (Hanson, 1985). Is it true that single custodial fathers are just as competent as single custodial mothers and/or married parents? If so, should parent's gender be one of the factors considered in awarding child custody, or are such practices discriminatory?

In order to examine these questions, a pair of competing hypotheses were developed based on the assumptions of two different perspectives that underlie most of the literature on gender differences in parenting. The first hypothesis is based on the individualistic perspective which assumes that learned gender roles are an integral part of the identity of men and women, and that gendered behavior is relatively static. It is believed that mothers have been socialized to be more nurturing, supportive and child-centered, and fathers have been socialized to be competitive and work-centered (Risman, 1989). In other words, mothers have been uniquely socialized to care for children in ways that men rarely master. Based on this perspective, mothers are considered more competent at parenting than fathers. Therefore, differences in parenting will be based on gender, and single mothers will have higher parenting scores than single fathers. If this hypothesis is supported, the current practice of awarding primary physical custody to single mothers makes sense.

The second hypothesis is based on a microstructural perspective which assumes that the parenting behaviors of men and women are adaptive to situational demands rather than internalized as gender roles. Therefore, when parents divorce, mothers and fathers will adapt to changes in their role responsibilities independently of gender (Risman, 1989). Based on this perspective, custodial mothers would be expected to have some characteristics of married fathers (less time for parenting) because they have taken on additional economic responsibilities normally provided by married fathers. Custodial fathers would be expected to have some characteristics of married mothers (more involvement in parenting) because they have taken on additional parenting responsibilities normally provided by married mothers. Therefore, changes in role responsibilities that follow divorce will outweigh the effects of gender, and differences in parenting will be between married and single mothers and married and single fathers. Support for this hypothesis challenges the current practice of awarding custody primarily to single mothers and suggests discrimination against single fathers.

In general, most of the literature on gender difference in parenting is based on the individualistic perspective (Risman, 1989). Furthermore, most of these studies have been limited in that: 1) single-father families were excluded (Capaldi & Patterson, 1991; Hetherington, 1989), 2) data on both parents were missing (Arditti & Keith, 1993; Hanson, 1986), and/or 3) data on the father-child relationship were collected from only one source, usually the mother (Downey & Powell, 1993; Amato & Rezac, 1994).

The purpose of this study was, first, to address the limitations of previous studies by comparing differences in parenting in divorced and intact families, using the responses of mothers, fathers, and their children. Then, competing hypotheses based on individualistic and

microstructural perspectives were used to evaluate whether the current practice of awarding custody primarily to mothers should be supported or challenged.

Methodology

Data were collected from the parent(s) and a focal child in 30 single-father, 30 single-mother, and 30 two-parent families. Most of the families were recruited through public schools, but a few were referred by word-of-mouth. The schools participating in the study were randomly selected from a list of all public elementary schools in two metropolitan school districts. Classrooms in grades one through four with a child from a single-father family were targeted for sample selection. Potential participants were identified by teachers were screened by the researcher using a telephone interview. A face-to-face interview was scheduled with those who qualified and were willing to participate. The response rate using these methods was 97 percent for the single fathers, 77 percent for the single mothers, 75 percent for the married parents, and 82 percent overall.

Criteria for participation in the study were: (1) the parent(s) and a child (age 6-10) lived in a household with no other adults, (2) the child resided with the parent(s) at least 20 nights per month, (3) the single-parent was divorced or separated with no history of remarriage, and (4) participation by both parents in two-parent families was required.

During the interview, the parent(s) completed a self-administered questionnaire in one room, while the researcher orally administered a questionnaire to the child in another room. Parent and child versions of the PPI (Hazzard, Christensen, & Margolin, 1983) were used to evaluate the parent-child relationship for each parent living in the household. Both the parent and child independently rated how often the parent engaged in 9 positive (e.g., comfort, time together) and

9 negative (e g., criticism, nagging) behaviors, using a 5-point scale. Items were summed to produce positive (POS) and negative (NEG) parenting behavior subscale scores. A total score (TOTAL) for the parent-child relationship was calculated by subtracting the NEG score from the POS score.

The POS, NEG, and TOTAL scores were used with ANOVA to evaluate differences in the parent-child relationship among single-mothers, single-fathers, married-mothers, and married-fathers. One set of analyses used the scores of parents; a second set used the scores of the children. A third set of ANOVAs was used to compare the PPI scores of the parents with those of their children.

Results

Description of the Sample

As expected, the parents in the sample differed on several characteristics. In general, the single mothers were somewhat younger, less educated, and had substantially lower incomes than the other parents. Compared to married parents, the single parents had fewer children, and their youngest child was slightly older, because the married parents were likely to have had an additional child during the years when the single parents were divorced. Married parents had been married for an average of 13 years compared to the single parents who had previously been married for an average of 7 years and had been living apart for 4 years (Table 1).

The parents were mostly Anglo-Americans with a small percentage of African-Americans and Hispanics. Although the sample lacked ethnic diversity, it was fairly representative of the distribution of the population in Nevada at the time of the study, and it was heterogeneous within each family structure with respect to education, occupation, and income. The sample included

parents who had not finished high school as well as those who had graduate degrees, blue collar as well as white collar workers, and households below the poverty line as well as those solidly in the middle class.

Parenting Behavior

When parenting was examined, the results of the analyses supported hypothesis 2, the microstructural perspective rather than hypothesis 1, the individualistic perspective. Differences in parenting were between single and married mothers and single and married fathers. Specifically, significant differences were found in the POS and TOTAL scores reported by parents, but no differences were found among the four groups when children's PPI scores were used, nor were there differences in the NEG scores of parents (Tables 2 and 3).

The POS scores of **single fathers** were higher than those of **married fathers**, but no different than those of the mothers. **Single mothers** had POS scores that were significantly lower than those of **married mothers**, but no different than those of the fathers. **Married fathers** also had lower POS scores than the **married mothers**.

The TOTAL scores of **single fathers** were no different than those of any of the other parents. In contrast, **single mothers** TOTAL scores were significantly lower than those of **married mothers.** The TOTAL scores of **married fathers** were also lower than those of the **married mothers**.

When POS, NEG, and TOTAL scores were analyzed, comparing the responses of parents and with those of their children, there was almost total agreement (Table 4). This finding is important because it underscores the reliability of the data.

Discussion

Single fathers in this study proved to be competent parents with more positive behaviors than married fathers and an overall parent-child relationship that was no different than any of the other parents. Furthermore, there was no evidence that gender had an effect on quality of parenting of custodial parents. As predicted using the microstructural perspective, differences that were found in parenting were between single and married mothers or single and married fathers...not between single mothers and single fathers. The only gender effect, in fact, was between the married parents, with married fathers having lower scores on positive and overall parenting than married mothers. This finding may be explained by differences in role responsibilities of married fathers compared to the other parents. Married fathers usually are not as involved in childcare as their wives, single fathers, or single mothers.

This study shows that when single fathers have access to custody, they adapt well to the parenting role. Some might question whether sampling issues contributed to this finding. It has been suggested that custodial single fathers are a very select group of unusually motivated fathers. One could argue that gender differences between single mothers and fathers may not really surface until more men, who represent the average father, gain custody.

However, nothing about the single fathers in this study suggested that they were a self-selected or homogeneous group. Personal observation of the researcher, demographic data, and diversity in the ways that single fathers obtained custody indicated otherwise.

Only 13 percent of the fathers received custody by fighting for it in court. Most obtained custody by mutual consent or when the mother abandoned the family. In several cases, custody was taken away from the mother and given to the father when it became apparent that the child

was being abused or neglected. Some of the fathers actively sought custody and others did not. Some gained custody by default. In spite of these differences, the single fathers as a group took on the job of custodial parent and did it well.

There also was no evidence that single mothers make better parents than single fathers following divorce. On the other hand, it is important to point out that although the single mothers were not as positive in their parenting as married mothers, they were no more negative than the other parents, and their overall parent-child relationship was as good as that of both the single and married fathers.

In many respects, the same biases impacting single fathers also operate to disadvantage single mothers. Just as there are stuctural barriers interfering with single fathers' ability to access custody, there are widely documented structural barriers interfering with single mothers' access to income (Day & Bahr, 1986; Mauldin, 1991). It is physically impossible for single mothers to earn what single fathers or married parents earn and it is socially unacceptable for single mothers to give up custody. Under the current system, single mothers are pressured to do it all...whether they want to or not. Rather than blaming the victim, professionals and policy makers need to address the context in which single mothers struggle to perform their multiple roles.

One of the major contributions of this study is that the findings can be used to challenge biases against both single mothers and single fathers. These biases originate in assumptions about gender roles which are imbedded in research and in our culture. Women are expected to be nurturant and child-centered and males are expected to be competitive and work-centered. Single mothers are presumed to be inadequate parents who cannot compensate for an absent father or deadbeat dad. Single fathers are presumed to lack the motivation and skills required to provide a

close nurturing relationship with children (Risman, 1989). Assumptions like this create biases in the law and social policy that ultimately interfere with the ability of both men and women to adapt to single parenting.

Rather than view single parent families as "broken" and problematic, maybe it is time to celebrate and support its resiliency. Maybe it is time to challenge individualistic assumptions of inadequacy and pathology. Maybe our focus needs to be on removing structural barriers rather than fixing what is assumed to be a flawed family structure.

Limitations

Although he results of this study represent a careful examination of an important issue, the study itself was limited in many ways. As expected, it was difficult to find single custodial fathers for the study, especially when the sample was limited to single parents with school age children who were living without other adults in the household. Having these sampling criteria meant that some of the hard-to-find single father families were disqualified, which further limited the sample size, but it also eliminated confounding variables which could have interfered with the interpretation of the results.

Another tradeoff that affected sample size involved collecting the data face-to-face. Although this method is time consuming and difficult, it ensured that mothers, fathers, and children answered independently. It also eliminated problem of missing data and provided an opportunity for participants to discuss questions and concerns related to the study.

Another problem was that there is no way to randomly sample the single-father population (Risman, 1989). Given this limitation, recruiting them through public schools was considered preferable to methods used in earlier studies that typically have relied on volunteer samples

recruited through advertisements and groups such as Parents Without Partners (Goldberg, Greenberger, Hamill, & O'Neil, 1992).

Ethnicity is also a concern. Although the results of this study are representative of Anglo-American families, with school age children, in the state of Nevada, they cannot be generalized to other ethnic groups, families with pre-school or adolescent children, and families in other parts of the country.

Future studies need to address these issues, as well as how having a live-in partner or relative affects the parent-child relationship. Longitudinal research examining how the divorce process affects parenting over time would also be useful. It is conceivable that the interaction of gender with context may vary depending on length of time since divorce and changes in the family's developmental processes.

In the meantime, the results of this study support the need to reconsider the ability of single-parent families in general and the competence of single custodial fathers in particular. They also suggest that gender inequities occur when the custody of children is disproportionately awarded to single mothers. The fact that the children's reports on the PPI are congruent with those of their parents underscores the reliability of these findings. This research provides empirical data that can be used by parents, attorneys, judges, and other professionals concerned with gender-bias in policies related to child custody.

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Table 1

Sample characteristics

Individual Variables	Divorced Parents Mothers (n=30)	Divorced Parents Fathers (n=30)	Married Parents Mothers (n=30)	Married Parents Fathers (n=30)	Total Sample (N=120)
Age (mean years)	35.6	37.5	36.4	39.9	37.4
Education (mean years)	13.3	15.1	14.3	14.7	14.4
Ethnicity					
Anglo-American	93%	86%	83%	86%	88%
African-American	7%	10%	10%	10%	9%
Hispanic	0%	4%	3%	6%	3%

Family Variables	Single-Mother Families (n=30)	Single-Father Families (n=30)	Two-Parent Families (n=30)	Total Sample (N=90)
Years Married	7.5	6.9	13.0	9.1
Years since Divorce/Separation	4.3	3.4		
Annual Family Income (median)	$15-20,000	$35-40,000	$45-50,000	$30-35,000
Household Size	2.9	2.8	4.6	3.4
Number of Children	1.9	1.8	2.6	2.1
Age of Children				
oldest child	9.3	9.6	11.0	10.0
youngest child	7.5	7.3	5.9	6.9

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations on the PPI for Single Mothers, Single Fathers, Married Mothers, and Married Fathers as Reported by Parents and their Children

	PPI SCORES		
	POS score	NEG score	TOTAL score
	Mean (Standard Dev.)	Mean (Standard Dev.)	Mean (Standard Dev.)
Single Mothers:			
Parent's Report	36.7 (3.63)	21.2 (2.93)	14.8 (5.32)
Child's Report	36.7 (4.65)	19.8 (4.38)	16.9 (7.57)
Single Fathers:			
Parent's Report	37.8 (4.28)	20.4 (4.46)	17.4 (7.17)
Child's Report	37.3 (5.01)	17.4 (6.18)	19.9 (9.32)
Married Mothers:			
Parent's Report	38.2 (3.43)	19.7 (4.27)	18.5 (5.95)
Child's Report	36.3 (5.03)	18.4 (3.99)	17.8 (7.14)
Married Fathers:			
Parent's Report	35.1 (3.86)	20.3 (3.86)	14.9 (5.51)
Child's Report	35.0 (6.32)	17.7 (5.98)	17.3 (9.46)

Table 3

Differences in Parenting Behaviors of Single Mothers, Single Fathers, Married Mothers, and Married Fathers, as Reported by Parents and their Children

	D.F.	F Ratio	F Probability
POS score			
Parents	3, 116	4.322	.006[a]
Children	3, 116	.956	.416
NEG score			
Parents	3, 116	.713	.546
Children	3, 116	1.267	.289
TOTAL score			
Parents	3, 116	2.743	.046[b]
Children	3, 116	.760	.519

[a] Married mothers reported more positive parenting behaviors than single mothers; married mothers and single fathers reported more positive behaviors than married fathers.

[b] Married mothers report higher overall parenting scores than either single mothers or married fathers.

Table 4

Differences Between Parents' and Children's Scores on PPI for Single Mothers, Single Fathers, Married Mothers, and Married Fathers

	D.F.	F Ratio	F Probability
Single Mothers:			
POS score	1. 58	.383	.538
NEG score	1. 58	2.019	.161
TOTAL score	1. 58	1.449	.234
Single Fathers:			
POS score	1. 58	.196	.659
NEG score	1. 58	4.900	.031[a]
TOTAL score	1. 58	1.409	.240
Married Mothers			
POS score	1. 58	2.924	.093
NEG score	1. 58	1.410	.240
TOTAL score	1. 58	.139	.711
Married Fathers			
POS score	1. 58	.005	.941
NEG score	1. 58	3.804	.056
TOTAL score	1. 58	1.482	.228

[a] Single fathers reported significantly more negative parenting behaviors than did their children.